

## An artistic study of the human body



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Essam-Darwich.

By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt**      **November 19, 2009, 2:00 am**

Currently at El Masar Gallery is a holistic exhibition celebrating the human body titled "Il Corpus Homanus. Regardless of the fact that both the use of Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man on the cover of the exhibition's catalogue and invitation, as well as titling it in Latin was somewhat irrelevant, the work on display was indoubtfully solid.

"Il Corpus Homanus hosts the works of five painters, one graphic designer and a sculptor. The best works in the show belong to the painters; their canvases truly capturing figural representation: an art form that is as endlessly giving as it is underrated.

Most prominent in his approach to presentation in this exhibition was Ibrahim El-Dessouki. His canvases boasted flawless composition, where he places his female figures in such a way that he almost abstracts them. His positioning of the limbs and placement of poses just short of awkward breaks the canvas into several sections, allowing the viewer to see the female body as a combination of shapes. His ultimate figure however, doesn't lose its three-dimensional sense of realism, yet it doesn't flaunt it either. El-Dessouki's figures are dolls that move with an alienesque form of beauty.

Equally eerie were his colors. Despite the fact that they were significantly lighter and more optimistic than his earlier, more grey works, they still gave a sense of unease. A block of apple green, canary yellow or shapes of black break the otherwise soft pastels of his canvases. The work is simply beautiful, balanced both through composition, palette and an incredible sensitivity to light and shade.

Equally inspiring was the work of Sami Abul Azm. The realism in the work and the craftsmanship with which his figures are constructed is sorely missed in the art scene - both locally and internationally. It was refreshing to see an artist whose attention to the sculpture of the human body was as intricate as his attention to the concept behind his work. His detailing of his women through his total understanding of how to depict light was excellent.

His canvases portrayed figures of women in solitude, sometimes completely alone or with mirrors of themselves. The women look as though they were in the process of self-critique; there was a strong sense of confrontation, guilt and remorse laced throughout their faces and further dictated through the choice of palette. Particularly dark, the colors ranged from an olive green to black, interrupted only by the stark white of the dresses (galabbeya) that the women were wearing.

Mainly oil on canvas, Abul Azm further displayed his talent by presenting two flawless pieces in the same style but with watercolors: the most difficult medium to control. Yet the most exquisite canvas in his collection of works depicted not the human body but three large handbags. Placed in the same type of scenery in which he had presented his women, the handbags looked alive and retained the same combination of dignity and remorse his figures had. It was truly a remarkable piece, sadly placed in the corner of the last room in the gallery.

Just when one was starting to raise an eyebrow on the sole depiction of women in a show commemorating the human body, Haytham Nawar's piece comes to view. Showing a pencil drawing of a man in what appears to be a bathtub, immersed entirely underwater with the exception of a hand peering out, the work was an interesting composition. Despite that the man's genitalia was bizarrely covered with a fig leaf (in a bathtub, no less) Nawar's use of large pencil strokes is both masterful and refreshing, placing drawing in the same league of grandeur as painting. His other pieces include a portrait of a man's face just coming out of water, and a double portrait of a woman that is so detailed it's impressive.

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Moving away from precise figures to more abstracted presentations was Sameh Ismail, whose signature line and palette can be recognized at a mile's distance. Sameh has pushed calligraphy to a whole new level - where the term itself has become his medium of expression, allowing the letters to become just mere lines in his work. Ismail has presented a new element in this show - creating 3D paintings - where he added wistful busts made of real skin to his work. The effect was excellent. Seen directly from the front, the works were flat, well balanced pieces, yet when viewed from any other angle the canvases became sculptures, giving birth to these impeccably placed ribbons of sculpted skin.

Equally abstracted but sadly not with the same level of craftsmanship was Karim El-Quriety's work. The largest of his canvases was the most successful; a large male silhouette mirroring the shape of a Louis XV salon chair depicted above it. Having been displayed before at Masar, the piece still retained its satire and intriguing composition.

Isam Darwich's sculptures are great, yet it was a curatorial mistake that they were not better presented. Swamped by the more impressive body of paintings, the sculptures of elongated navels look like an afterthought, peppering the show at neglected spots. One would've preferred that they take more of a center stage of Nermin Hammam's work, which is yet again a set of manipulated images that barely touch on the subject at hand. Hammam seems to have become a victim of her own trademark, and despite her many successes in her previous shows - her last one at Townhouse was very interesting - she may need to innovate her approach.

Overall "Il Corpus Homanus" houses enough good work to be seen and should not be missed.



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